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China's 'Influence Operations' in Academia, Confucius Institutes and Soft Power: Strategic Responses of India, Bangladesh and Nepal

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ABSTRACT

China's efforts to influence the academia in other countries have disconcerted the international community. These efforts, manifesting through a variety of approaches and strategies, including using students to export the Chinese state's narratives on controversial issues and deploying Confucius Institutes for propaganda purposes, are becoming conspicuous across the world. While Beijing's attempt to emphasize its narrative is not novel, China's efforts to influence have become increasingly bold and aggressive, compared with a more subtle 'soft power' oriented approach adopted in the past.

This research explores China's efforts to cultivate influence among academia in the South Asian region. While primarily focusing on India, the paper also examines similar efforts in Bangladesh and Nepal. For a nuanced understanding of China's influence actions, this research employs a comparative approach by first identifying applications in Australia, Canada and the United Kingdom, and subsequently diagnosing the same in India and South Asia (particularly Bangladesh and Nepal). The research underscores the contrast in the character of China's application of influence strategies across countries, which, at least for India, is also an outcome of the strained relations between the two countries. Policy suggestions gathered from the Indian experience are proposed for consumption of a wider scholarly and strategic global audience.

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ACRONYMS AND TERMS

Acronym/Term	Definition
ACRI	Australia China Relations Institute
ATAS	Academic Technology Approval Scheme
BICC	Birendra International Convention Centre
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
CAIFU	Chinese Association for International Understanding
CASS	Chinese Academy of Social Sciences
CC	Confucius Classroom
CCCS	Centre for Contemporary Chinese Studies
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CI	Confucius Institute
CIVS	China-India Visiting Scholars
CSC	Chinese Study Centre
ICS-HYI	Institute of Chinese Studies-Harvard Yenching Institute
ICWA	Indian Council for World Affairs
IR	International Relations
ISAS	Institute of South Asian Studies
JGU	Jindal Global University
KU	Kathmandu University
MCC	Millennium Challenge Corporation
MEA	Ministry of External Affairs
MOE	(Chinese) Ministry of Education
MOU	Memorandum of Understanding
RIS	Research and Information System for Developing World
TMED	Technical and Madrasah (Islamic) Education Division
TU	Tribhuvan University
TVET	Technical and Vocational Education and Training
UFWD	United Front Work Department
UK	United Kingdom
US	United States

1. INTRODUCTION

Education, including the use of exchange programs to increase student mobility and efforts to promote culture abroad, has always played a key role in International Relations (IR) as a tool of soft power. Collaboration in higher education and research promotes communication and facilitates the exchange of peoples and perspectives between countries, thereby promoting appreciation of the ‘other’ culture and education systems. The contemporary world, particularly major powers like the United States (US), Canada, the United Kingdom (UK), and China, devote considerable resources to their education programs and institutions to ‘win hearts and minds’¹ (Nye 2004).

Although education is recognized as an effective soft power tool for cultivating goodwill, the Chinese approach to educational exchange differs considerably (Sinha Palit 2017). China’s vision of soft power, or *ruan shi li*, was conceived during the early 1990’s as cultivating an ‘admirable’ culture and ideological system that other states would tend to follow (Huning 1993). This soft power strategy has transformed dramatically during the last decade, with rising emphasis on coercive diplomacy – the use of negative actions to change the behaviour of target states (Zhang 2019). Beijing is also deploying an assertive brand of fiery diplomacy through ‘wolf warriors’ to defend its ‘national honour and dignity’ and ‘refute all groundless slander’ targeting China (Kewalramani 2021). Furthermore, China has begun using traditional soft power tools that focus on academia, such as scholarships for foreign students and short-term visiting programs targeting the faculty, to achieve direct influence compared to the former ‘admirable’ soft power influence.

China’s Confucius Institutes (CIs)² increasingly represent Beijing’s changing soft power approach. For years, CIs were a primary pillar of China’s traditional soft power strategy to cultivate international goodwill. Recently, though, their mandate has not only changed with a strong push towards disseminating propaganda (Lim, Bergin 2018) but they have also been accused of running influence campaigns abroad and are being monitored for their role in pressuring host universities to minimize criticism of China to the detriment of academic freedom.

Additionally, China’s aim to replace Western firms – currently at the forefront of key technologies – with Chinese national champions has also led Beijing to adopt a set of policies to forcefully transfer sensitive technology (Branstetter 2018) from technologically advanced countries like the US and Canada, which could also have adverse implications for the global economy.³ The targets are not Western multinationals alone but Western scientific research institutes and research staff as well. The Chinese government not only maintains government programs that invite overseas Chinese and foreign experts and scholars in strategic sectors to teach and work in China, but also utilizes academic partnerships and collaborations for espionage (CTV News 2021). In addition, China sends experts abroad to gain access to cutting-edge technical knowledge of developed countries, like the US, without disclosing the organization or individual’s connections to the Chinese government

1 A modern state tries to ‘win hearts and minds’ of the people abroad as part of its foreign policy. A major soft power goal, it’s currency in modern strategic discourse is courtesy Joseph Nye, Jr. who justifies the term by arguing ‘when you can get others to admire your ideals and to want what you want, you do not have to spend as much on sticks and carrots to move them in your direction’ (2004).

2 According to the BBC, there were around 548 CIs and 1,193 Confucius Classrooms (CCs) in 2018.

3 China has been regarded a particular threat when it comes to state espionage because under a National Intelligence Law passed in 2017 Chinese intelligence agencies are allowed to compel Chinese organisations and individuals to carry out work on their behalf and provide support, cooperation and assistance on request. According to the Centre for the Protection of National Infrastructure: ‘This may affect the level of control you have over any data, information and research assets that you share with Chinese individuals and organisations, especially if your research is in an area that is of interest to the Chinese state’ (O’ Malley 2019).

(O'Connor 2019). The larger objective clearly is to achieve global leadership in technologically sensitive sectors (including military technology) that enable China to exert global influence and facilitate its hegemonic ambitions.

China's strong economic fundamentals have enabled such partnerships, with the possibility of forced technology transfer becoming more real as China gradually penetrates academia,⁴ including think tanks and overseas research organisations. Beijing's ability to manipulate and influence foreign students and faculty has also expanded rapidly, as will be discussed in Section 2. In fact, China's targeting of the overseas teaching faculty is deliberate and in line with its larger global intent to influence.

In this age of social networking, 'networked' professors – manipulated or influenced by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) through various tools like short-term fellowships and research grants – become tools themselves. These professors help in facilitating, communicating and amplifying China's perspectives on issues, advertently or inadvertently, through their 'networked' student followers, who further spread (tweet/retweet) and share their teachers' views, enabling China to extend its influence even further. This kind of Chinese activism in higher education systems has become increasingly conspicuous, particularly in the West, with similar tendencies starting to become visible in the South Asian academia. In fact, in South Asia, Chinese effort has also been exerted to familiarise (or impose) a Chinese perspective given that South Asian academia is much more familiar with the Western narrative on China. Is China pursuing academic colonialism? Is it aiming to tackle the 'hegemony of discourse'⁵ and its own weakness of the 'power of the word' (*hua yu quan*) (Sinha Palit 2017)? Or is it feeling empowered and at near equivalence with the educational institutions and systems of the West, and seeking to surpass the institutions it has for years admired? These questions are complex and difficult to answer.

1.1. Research Approach and Country Selection

The research begins by noting the absence of secondary literature analyzing Beijing's efforts to influence academia and advance propaganda in South Asia. The existing literature on the subject is entirely focused on the Western experience. This includes both scholarly and journalistic writings that capture evidence from the US, Canada, and the UK. China's influence efforts in these countries have been extensively researched and documented (Diamond, Schell 2018; Sam 2020; Lee 2018; Kynge 2021; Blackwell 2020; *Wion* 2020; *CTV* 2021; Connolly 2019; *Al Jazeera* 2021; Griffiths 2019; Lim, Bergin 2018; Wintour 2021). In recent years, given Chinese coercive tactics and influence campaigns in Australia's higher education, and even domestic politics, Beijing's influence operations in the country have also drawn significant attention (Fitzgerald 2018; Horwitz 2017; *HRW* 2021; *BBC* 2019; Brophy 2021; Jeffrey 2020; Joske 2020).

China's use of CIs to influence has been particularly noticeable in the West. The institutes, initially mandated to promote Chinese cultural exports across the world through specific focus on Mandarin language and cultural engagements, have gradually begun assuming propagandist roles, underpinning their connect with the Chinese state's influence-embedding machinery. Most literature focuses on the role of CIs in spreading Chinese propaganda in the Western developed countries (Blackwell 2020; Ellsworth 2020; Gil 2020, 2018; Green-Riley 2020; Jakhar 2019). Specific debates on CIs and their roles in university campuses, including promoting censorship of topics sensitive to China, have also been studied closely (Sharma 2021; Fulda, Missal 2020; Matthews 2020). However, as noted

⁴ For convenience, the author uses the term academia to include the faculty, students and thinkers.

⁵ An attempt to impose a particular discourse over other narratives, in this case, predominantly Western.

earlier, the scholarly examination of South Asia and India in terms of the role of CIs is confined to limited efforts (e.g. Sinha Palit 2017). Parts of the research in this report build upon this limited earlier body of work, including the author's own book, *Analysing China's Soft Power Strategy and Comparative Indian Initiatives* (2017).

In view of the wider lack of research attention and the concomitant absence of literature on Chinese influence operations within academia in South Asia, this research intends to fill the gap. Lack of secondary literature on the subject required analysis of primary sources. Such exploration has intended to identify Beijing's *influence campaigns* in India – a prominent global Middle Power and South Asia's largest country and economy with a long and contiguous land border with China. Primary research methods were also employed for examining similar influence operations in Bangladesh and Nepal.

Many of the insights reflected are obtained from primary empirical research. The most important research method relied upon was interviews conducted on the basis of a carefully crafted set of questions (Annexures I, II & III). Face-to-face meetings for interviews were difficult to conduct due to restrictions on travel arising from the prevailing pandemic conditions. However, it was possible to conduct some meetings in India, facilitated greatly by the author's presence in the country during the period of the fellowship. Other interviews were carried out over the phone. In some cases, responses to the questions were obtained through emails. The interviewees were selected based on the relevance of their insights to the overall research goals – identifying the nature and pattern of Chinese influence operations among academia. Interviewees include teaching and research faculty from leading universities, experts from think-tanks, senior journalists and independent experts. All the experts chosen either work on China-related topics or have had engagements with the country in various capacities. The author's familiarity with local languages in India, Bangladesh, and Nepal was useful in connecting with experts and also in accessing some research material in local languages. However, in some cases, interviewees were reluctant to engage in a wide-ranging conversation, largely because speaking on China and sharing impressions on its influence roles is a sensitive subject. Indeed, several experts reached out via phone to avoid responding in writing. Several among those interviewed, especially in Bangladesh and Nepal, requested anonymity.

The choice of countries for understanding China's influence operations within regional academia was arrived at as follows: India, Bangladesh, and Nepal represent three distinct categories of states for studying China's influence operations. India is one of the world's prominent Middle Powers as well as being one of the most vibrant and populous democracies and largest economies. As such, when paired with the existing body of knowledge on China's activities in Australia, Canada, and the UK, the Indian experience with Chinese influence applications yields important insights into China's general academic influence strategy against Middle Powers globally. India being one of China's largest neighbours, as well as a significant Asian regional power, makes its experience in this regard even more interesting.

Bangladesh and Nepal are both regional democracies, though with significant differences in geography, economy and population sizes. Bangladesh is graduating from its current status of low-income poor economy to a middle-income country. Its vibrant economy poses significant opportunities for China. Furthermore, while being an Islamic country, Bangladesh's liberal values, reflected in its social and cultural empowerment progress, makes it an interesting country for China to partner with. The small and land-locked Himalayan kingdom of Nepal has borders with China and India. It is a country that offers China access to the Himalayan geography and enables it to have significant political control around the strategically sensitive autonomous region of Tibet.

All three countries demonstrate heterogeneous social, political, cultural and economic capacities. They symbolise the marked contrasts that characterize South Asia – a region both near to China and of great strategic importance from a geopolitical and a geo-economic perspective. South Asia is vital to realization of China's strategic aspirations through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which envisions inclusion of all three countries in its network.

South Asia's regional varieties and complexities make it imperative for China to choose its influence strategies with a more flexible perspective. This is exemplified by the way China has historically conducted its soft power outreach in the region. While CIs have proliferated in the West and the Asia-Pacific, their numbers are far fewer in South Asia. This might be due to the overarching cultural and strategic presence of India. Also, many of China's influence tactics in the region are determined by its imperative to balance India's strategic influence over the region – a requirement made all the more necessary by China's regional competition and strained ties with India. The observations and conclusions reached by the study with respect to India – and those from Bangladesh and Nepal – will be of great significance in shaping the evidence and trajectory of scholarship on China's regional influence-building roles.

2. CHINA'S INFLUENCE CAMPAIGNS IN ACADEMIA

This section examines Beijing's influence operations in academic institutions. First, Section 2.1 details Chinese efforts to influence higher education in Australia, Canada, and the UK, which have been well documented in existing literature. Exploring China's influence activities in global Middle Powers with economic, cultural and demographic clout will establish a comparable context for studying similar efforts in India – South Asia's largest country and a prominent global Middle Power. Accordingly, Section 2.2 details China's influence operations in India and two additional South Asian countries, Nepal and Bangladesh.

Amid a global environment increasingly characterized by its escalating conflict with the US, China has engaged in copious 'influence operations' worldwide. Influence operations, defined by RAND as 'the collection of tactical information about an adversary as well as the dissemination in propaganda in pursuit of a competitive advantage over an opponent' are extensively employed by the CCP. The CCP's penetration of civil society and use of foreign nationals (including academics) for this purpose has been remarkable. China's efforts to develop overseas influence have included shaping the narrative of a 'discourse power' via a more forceful version of soft power, whereby it is seeking to train the foreign academic community on sensitive issues like Taiwan and Hong Kong from a Chinese perspective. Fully understanding and countering these operations and activities will be challenging for most of the world's major democracies.

2.1. Beijing's Influence Campaigns in Academia: Australia, Canada, and the UK

When a foreign power – in this case China – seeks to influence a country's internal public debate and academia through *unofficial* channels in ways that are both non-transparent and deceptive, it raises apprehension. Some experts believe that Beijing is emulating Russia's approach to influence operations overseas by using both covert and overt tactics to manipulate public opinion (Kenney, Bergmann, Lamond 2019). China is also replicating Russia's aggressiveness in influence operations to achieve certain political and foreign policy goals. For example, China advances alternate narratives in line with its own nationalist perspective on various issues to manipulate the foreign audience.

In Australia, Canada, and the UK, Beijing's strategy has ultimately been buttressed by a severe lack of domestic investment in university education, resulting in universities eagerly seeking external funding. Such desperation has increased vulnerability to foreign influence and interference, putting 'universities at risk from private philanthropists and foreign lobbying alike' (Suri 2020). In fact, all three countries – Australia, Canada, and the UK – are salient case studies of vibrant, democratic global or Middle Powers engaged in fighting Chinese state propaganda and influence campaigns on their leading university campuses. While in Australia, Chinese influence activities are more visible and widely discussed, pervading universities as well as domestic politics (Ryan 2020), similar activities in Canada and the UK have also begun to generate concern.

2.1.1. Chinese Students and Funding

Australia, Canada, and the UK are increasingly witnessing China's aggressive employment of its students and research funding for influence-building operations. As Table 1 suggests, the high growth in the number of incoming Chinese students to these global education hubs underscore the reliance of universities and higher education centres on China as a source of enrollment and funding.

In the case of Australia, growth in international students was accompanied by halving of federal support as a proportion of university budgets (*The University of Queensland* 2018). As a result, reliance on foreign students increased sharply. Before the outbreak of COVID-19, in 2019, higher education in Australia generated around A\$12 billion (US\$8.5 billion) in export revenue, with most coming from China (Brophy 2021). Incoming Chinese students and greater Chinese funding has coincided with a push toward the ‘Chinese agenda’ in Australian universities. In fact, Australia’s lobbying of world leaders in April 2020 for an inquiry into the origins of the pandemic led Beijing to caution its students against choosing Australian universities, threatening a \$27.5 billion market (Needham 2020). This exemplifies the Chinese government’s approach of taking economic steps to reap diplomatic and larger strategic benefits in the host country, as well as China’s use of students to communicate targeted messages.

By co-opting universities, and manipulating elite opinions, Beijing has also been able to buy political access and influence, notwithstanding Canberra’s pushback against China’s interference efforts following Chinese economic threats and retaliation (Searight 2020). This phenomenon has raised concerns about ‘foreign’ actors within academia. Similarly, in Canada and the UK, China is again a major source of international exchange students and provides substantial funding for universities. In all three countries, some of these Chinese students serve CCP objectives by acting as Chinese propaganda actors to influence other students and keep a vigil on faculty members. Interestingly, the CCP’s target is not foreign students alone but their own students as well, who are expected to pose as agents of the states in overseas campuses. There are reports that Chinese students are compelled to engage in self-censorship on controversial issues even in foreign universities to avoid a backlash from Beijing (Hurst 2021).

Table 1. Chinese Students Studying in Australia, Canada, and the UK⁶

Country	Number of Chinese Students (2015)	Number of Chinese Students (2020)	Growth (%)
Australia	135,857	190,926	40.5
Canada	117,840	141,400 (2019)	20
UK	89,540	120,385	34.5

2.1.2. Pressure Tactics and Intimidation

China has not only been employing considerable pressure tactics in foreign universities but has also exploited its economic advantage as a major supplier of students to global education hubs like Australia, Canada, and the UK to obtain geopolitical advantages. With the recent deterioration in Australia-China relations, China has discouraged its students – used as enablers of influence by the CCP – from studying in Australia (Bargshaw et al 2020), also alluded to earlier. The pressure tactics seem to have worked well, with Australians worried about the significant financial losses for universities and higher education institutions (Ibid). As part of its overall pressure tactics, Beijing also banned Australian academics from entering China in 2020 after Canberra cancelled the visas of

⁶ Sources: Australian government, January-July 2021 (<https://internationaleducation.gov.au/research/datavisualisations/Pages/Student-number.aspx>), CIC News, 20 February 2020, (<https://www.cicnews.com/2020/02/642000-international-students-canada-now-ranks-3rd-globally-in-foreign-student-attraction-0213763.html#gs.bde4c8>), Vancouver Sun, 12 June 2020, (<https://vancouversun.com/opinion/columnists/douglas-todd-number-of-chinese-students-in-canada-plunges-by-44-per-cent>), BBC News, 15 July 2020 (<https://www.bbc.com/news/education-51149445>)

two Chinese academics – charged with ‘foreign interference’ (Ford et al 2020). These moves represent examples of coercive diplomacy.

China’s pressure tactics, including intimidation, have also been increasingly employed to harass and coax senior academics and students perceived to be critical of the CCP or prone to discussing ‘sensitive’ issues such as Taiwan, Tibet, Hong Kong, or Xinjiang towards more accommodating views. In 2017, *The Quartz* reported at least four incidents in August in which Australian faculty members, who inadvertently commented on issues considered sensitive by China (e.g. Taiwan, Arunachal Pradesh, Ladakh, Aksai Chin), had to apologise to Chinese students (Horwitz 2017). *The Quartz* report only vindicates the point that some Chinese students indeed pose as Chinese agents in overseas universities and are most likely being pushed by the CCP and encouraged by the Embassy to boldly demonstrate their nationalism abroad. Beijing also uses incentives to pressure foreign universities to do its bidding, with multiple instances of Australian universities succumbing to Chinese pressure. For example, an Australian university did decide to suspend its lecturer for hurting the Chinese student’s sentiments, with Beijing subsequently offering it a ‘license to operate in China’ (*Monash University* 2012).

Similar trends also appear in Canadian academia. Subjects deemed ‘sensitive’ by the CCP are either forbidden or taught as a Chinese version in many of the universities that boast a large number of Chinese students. These incidents seem to occur because most agreements, signed between Canadian universities and CIs, ignore any clause on academic freedom (Blackwell 2020).⁷ In fact, the *Hanban*,⁸ which sends academic materials to Canada regularly, uses them skilfully to present the Chinese national perspective, such as depicting Taiwan as a part of China (Ibid). The University of Nottingham from the UK faces a similar predicament in its Ningbo campus. As a foreign university on Chinese soil, it has CCP officials on its management board, and is required to frequently respond to queries by the Chinese Ministry of Education (MOE). Academics at Nottingham University on both the Chinese and British campuses have also been pressured into cancelling events related to Tibet and Taiwan (Kelly 2020). According to multiple British academics, Taiwan, Tibet, and Tiananmen – and now Hong Kong – are being marginalized and squeezed out of academic discussions (Griffiths 2019).

2.1.3. Manipulation of Policymakers

China has also attempted to influence policymakers, either by using its financial clout or by employing language classes. For instance, Bob Carr, a senior politician who served as premier of New South Wales and also as the Australian Foreign Minister, was previously known for his anti-China views including his description of CCP ideology as a ‘ludicrously outdated notion’ (Fitzgerald 2018). However, in 2014, the Australia China Relations Institute (ACRI) – a Centre set up at the University of Technology in Sydney with a large Chinese donation – selected Carr as its Director. In an about-face, Carr became a strong advocate for China’s economic and geopolitical interests, imbuing the Centre with the task of projecting an ‘unabashedly positive and optimistic view of the Australia-China relationship’ (Suri 2020). He even took on sceptics by calling them ‘cold warriors’ and denying that there was any attempt by China to interfere in Australia’s internal affairs (Ibid).

⁷ With Canada’s dependence on Chinese students, the clause was perhaps ignored by the universities with Beijing taking advantage of the prevailing dynamics.

⁸ *Hanban* is the Chinese National Office for teaching Chinese as a foreign language.

Similarly, a Centre at the University of Leeds in the UK, offering language classes and lessons on Chinese culture to local businesses, ‘secretly’⁹ aims to foster close links with British bureaucrats’ (Kenber 2019). This is an interesting aspect of the Chinese influence strategy, given that teaching has been traditionally employed as a soft power tool, and is now evolving as a new instrument of Chinese influence-building and coercion.

Yuen Pau Woo, a Canadian Senator, was also accused of having links with the CCP in 2021. He was among a number of Canadian senators who had voted to defeat a motion decrying Beijing’s treatment of Uyghur Muslims as a genocide (Bryden 2021). Singling out Woo was criticised as ‘racist’. However, the difference in perceptions of the Chinese narrative on Xinjiang by elected lawmakers reflect the currency that such narratives have gained, albeit marginal, in domestic politics and among influential policymakers in Canada. The examples from Australia, UK, and Canada reflect an implicit but powerful goal of Chinese influence operations that aim to impact domestic policymakers. The objective, ostensibly, is to convincingly position China’s vantage points on various controversial issues in domestic and political circles of Western nations otherwise heavily critical of China.

2.1.4. Using Research Collaboration for Manipulation

Apart from influencing policymakers using language classes and financial clout, there have also been reports of research collaborations – another soft power tool – used by Beijing for influence-building operations abroad. With Chinese research collaborators increasingly accused of stealing state secrets in the US, countries like Canada are busy scrutinising their own scientific collaborations with China (CTV News 2021) and investigating Beijing’s use of academic exchanges through the ‘Thousand Talents Program’ established in 2008 (Somos 2021).

Research collaboration has also been a focus in Australia. 16.2 percent of Australian scientific papers are co-authored with Chinese counterparts, with most of the research occurring in STEM subjects – including materials science, chemical engineering and energy. This collaboration has raised suspicions over the potential to enable Chinese access to critical technology applications for military use (Searight 2020).

Both Australia and Canada are equally concerned over the CCP’s attempt to dictate non-controversial topics to Canadian academics in research institutes and universities funded by China – a well calibrated effort by the Party to prevent the growth of anti-China opinions in these overseas university campuses. Andrew Hastie, an Australian politician, very appropriately has called universities ‘modern battlegrounds of covert influence and interference’ (Ibid). China’s United Front Work Department (UFWD) also plays a facilitator role in this regard.

2.1.5. The Role of the United Front Work Department and the Chinese Embassy

The UFWD¹⁰ – responsible for influencing elite individuals and organizations inside and outside China – has been particularly active overseas, attempting to sway local public opinions (Lloyd 2020). Hailed by Xi in 2015 as ‘an important magic weapon’ for strengthening his Party’s rule, the UFWD has recently drawn scrutiny for its links to political interference, economic espionage, and influence

⁹ While the author does not explain why it is done ‘secretly,’ it might be because the Centre perhaps wants to avoid being seen as agents of the CCP.

¹⁰ Founded in 1921, the UFWD directly reports to the Central Committee of the CCP.

on university campuses in Australia (Joske 2020). In Canada, too, the UFWD – by offering benefits and support to Chinese students on Canadian university campuses – urges them to rebut criticism of the Party and encourages their support for the CCP’s global rise (Somos 2021).

The case of Canada also demonstrates direct links between Chinese students and the Chinese consulate. For example, WeChat messages from Chinese student groups to Consulate officials have demonstrated coordination to stymie academic discussions on controversial topics, with students even reporting on the seminar topics organised by Canadian faculty members (Somos 2021) to communicate the faculty’s personal/professional alignment back to China.

The following section investigates China’s growing influence operations in South Asia, primarily in India, while discussing Bangladesh and Nepal contextually.

2.2. Beijing’s Influence Operations in India, Nepal, and Bangladesh

This section delves into the distinct features of China’s influence-building operations in India, Nepal, and Bangladesh. Each of these countries is different in its engagement with China. In fact, Beijing’s strong interest in South Asia and its effort to deeply engage Nepal and Bangladesh through the landmark BRI – a project that India has opposed in several international forums including the Shanghai Cooperation Organization [SCO] (*Hindustan Times* 2020) – has raised a red flag for New Delhi. While China has been engaging Nepal and Bangladesh aggressively, its engagement of India – the largest country in the region and China’s competitor for strategic influence – appears more muted, given their complex relations. The 1962 war between India and China continues to cast a shadow on the relationship. The friendship and exchanges that previously bound the two countries through the ancient Nalanda University¹¹ (5th-12th century CE) have been replaced by animosity and suspicion of the ‘other.’ The Doklam standoff in 2017¹² and the Galwan skirmish in 2020¹³ have only distanced the two neighbours further.

Beijing’s image as a responsible global leader, in the meantime, has arguably declined post-pandemic (Pence 2020; Jaishankar 2020; Kynge 2021) due to its alleged non-disclosure of information on the origin of the COVID-19 and purported efforts to influence multilateral institutions like the World Health Organisation and the United Nations (Feldwisch-Drentrup 2020; Lee 2020). India, on the other hand, has been active in projecting itself as a constructive multilateral player through efforts to supply COVID-19 vaccines and participation in the virtual SAARC Summit in 2020. Apart from being ranked the fourth most powerful nation influencing the Asia-Pacific after the US, China, and Japan in 2020 (*Lowy Institutes Asia Power Index* 2020), India is also a part of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) – a grouping aimed to counter China’s growing assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific (*Wion* 2020b). Given these evolving dynamics, India is a major emerging global power that China views as a strategic competitor.

Unlike India, Nepal’s relationship with China is less fraught with challenges. Kathmandu continues to maintain its deep ties to China. Given its location in the Himalayas and its proximity to Tibet,

¹¹ Nalanda was a renowned Buddhist monastic university in ancient Magadha, modern-day Bihar in India. The university was a major source of the 657 Sanskrit texts carried by the Chinese pilgrim Xuan Zang and the 400 Sanskrit texts carried by Yi Jing to China in the 7th-century, which influenced East Asian Buddhism.

¹² The China India border standoff (or Doklam standoff) in 2017 refers to the military border military clash between the Indian Armed Forces and the People’s Liberation Army of China over Chinese construction of a road in Doklam near a trijunction border area, known as Donglang, or Donglang Caochang, in Chinese.

¹³ An aggressive face-off between Indian and Chinese forces in the Galwan river valley in Ladakh, a disputed Himalayan border region, took off beginning early May 2020.

Nepal is geopolitically critical for China. While Nepal has responded positively to China's One-China Policy¹⁴ (Gupta 2020), a stable relationship with Nepal also restricts passage of Tibetans into India – a movement China is keen on stopping. These motivations encourage Beijing to strengthen ties with Nepal through various efforts, including engaging Nepalese academia. This effort is in addition to geo-economic engagement through the BRI, which is discussed later in the paper.

A turning point in China's penetration into Nepal's domestic politics, higher education, and society was the border blockade with India in 2015.¹⁵ The developments since 2015 seem to have 'created an image of China as a new superpower that can assist Nepal without unnecessarily interfering in the country's domestic affairs' (Bhattacharjee 2021). While India – Nepal's longest ally and close neighbour in the region – has emerged as an 'interventionist "southern neighbour"' trying to influence Nepal's internal discussions, China is seen more as a *benign* power offering Kathmandu an alternative global order (Ibid). Some experts even feel a closer and stronger relationship with China will enable Nepal to re-set its over-reliance on India and help bring in a new era of trade and connectivity, facilitated by the BRI¹⁶ – a dimension that is actively exploited by China and discussed later in the paper.

Bangladesh, while historically close to India, has in more recent years deepened engagement with China, while Beijing is seen increasingly interfering in Bangladesh's internal and foreign policy matters. In a distinct example of coercive diplomacy, China warned Bangladesh against joining the Quad alliance, emphasizing that Dhaka's participation in the anti-Beijing 'club' would result in 'substantial damage' to bilateral relations (*The Print* 2021). However, Dhaka's response was curt, with the Foreign Minister stating that Bangladesh is a sovereign country and will 'decide our course of action based on the fundamental principle we have for the welfare of our country' (*Prothom Alo* 2021). Notwithstanding the sharp reply witnessed in this particular case, Bangladesh remains heavily tilted towards Beijing with Bangladeshi academia seeking deeper collaboration with China.¹⁷

The rest of the section will focus on identifying the patterns and character of Chinese influence campaigns within academia in India, Nepal, and Bangladesh.

2.2.1. Academics' Perception of China in India, Nepal, and Bangladesh

Based on interviews with university professors and scholars, the Indian academic's overall perception of China is by and large negative, unlike Nepal and Bangladesh's. In fact, the Indian academic's perception of China is typically of concern and apprehension over China's growing influence in the Indian academia. Indeed, some interviewees expressed claims that China is funding think tanks in India to produce pro-China literature, which could not be independently verified. However, the body of literature on covert Chinese influence operations in India is indeed growing, with such work alluding to the Chinese military using academics, scholars, businessmen, professionals and journalists to mount intelligence operations in India (Yadav 2020).

¹⁴ The 'One-China policy' is a policy that asserts that there is only one sovereign state under the name China and Taiwan is part of China, as opposed to the idea that there are two states, the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the Republic of China (ROC), whose official names incorporate 'China'.

¹⁵ The blockade of border with India, which began on 23 September 2015, was an economic and humanitarian crisis which severely affected Nepal and its economy.

¹⁶ As revealed from interviews with local experts.

¹⁷ Ibid.

Notwithstanding these operations, Indian academia has yet to witness examples comparable to the intimidation or harassment witnessed in other countries, or of influence over policymakers (such as the previously discussed example of Bob Carr in Australia).

Alternative impressions also exist in India, with several Indian academics engaged in teaching Chinese language and courses on China denying having experienced any Chinese influence campaigns. A professor from a leading Indian university interviewed by the author emphasized the supportive role of the Chinese consulate and the Embassy. However, such support is expressed in view of the fact that ‘...we are the people who are dealing with China’s culture, language, so we may be able to influence a large group of people in respect to India-China relations’. Clearly, the effort to influence by China in this instance is not coercive, as it has been for Australia and Canada noted before. However, the faculty also made it clear that he and his colleagues have been careful to avoid controversial issues like Tibet, the disputed border, or Taiwan, focusing instead on more benign subjects of culture and people-to-people relations¹⁸ which again could indicate the Indian academia’s sensitivity in avoiding controversial issues which they feared could ruffle Beijing.

In Nepal, China’s efforts at influencing and manipulation seem more effective. As one interviewee put it, ‘I think their engagement is quite successful, as we rarely hear any anti-China narrative in the country from the academia’.¹⁹ Indeed, criticism on China has been hardly visible in the local press, despite arguably jarring events such as the border closure with China affecting movement of goods for several months. In contrast, local academia is quite vocal when it comes to the US or India.²⁰ This is evident from the prominent public debate over the US-funded Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) project,²¹ which is noteworthy given the paucity of local discussions on the implications of the BRI.²² While there is a small body of opinions on the downsides of Beijing’s engagement with Kathmandu (Sigdel 2018), it pales in comparison to the overtly positive perception of China.²³

With respect to Bangladesh, China, while playing on the public’s fear and insecurities vis a vis India, has also been influencing its higher education. In fact, China’s influence operations in Bangladesh has been so powerful that several Bangladeshi academics have even begun to ‘think like the Chinese’²⁴ with the BRI regarded as the key to its economic development: ‘Bangladesh is a proud member of this

¹⁸ As revealed from interviews with local experts.

¹⁹ Author’s interview with a Nepalese expert.

²⁰ It is rumoured that China has been feeding some local opinion-makers to build counter-narratives to this project. This was shared in author’s interviews with a local expert.

²¹ The public debate over the MCC has been going strong in Nepal with the Nepalese seeing the project as ‘infringing Nepali sovereignty’. The US aid is also being regarded as a part of the Indo-Pacific strategy to be used for military purposes (Amatya 2020).

²² Author’s interview with an Indian faculty.

²³ According to an interviewee from Nepal, there are two factions in Nepal’s academia: one who’s been taught in China or have worked with them and therefore have some level of engagement with Chinese universities and think tanks, and the other who view China essentially from the Western prism. While the first group claims to know more about China than the others, the second suffers language barriers. As a result, the first faction, and the more dominant, is noticed to be hardly critical of China’s role in Nepal and is a catalyst promoting Nepal-China relationship (this also includes all the former Nepali ambassadors to China). The latter, though few in numbers, do try to critically evaluate Beijing’s evolving role but proves less effective. Interestingly, the Nepali academia is much more critical of India and its motives, given the 2015 blockade, alluded to earlier. Or perhaps, Beijing’s anti-India influence campaigns have been successful.

²⁴ As revealed from interviews with local experts.

initiative and can play a significant role in the advancement of this epic project' (Sakahwat 2020).²⁵ In fact, the *Centre for East Asia* (Foundation) – claiming to be a non-profit and non-political independent study circle – even launched a magazine, *The Belt and Road*, with senior officials attending the launch, and hailing the initiative as befitting Bangladesh's national priorities (*Xinhuanet* 2020). Several senior academics and prominent diplomats have not only written for the magazine but have also extolled its benefits for Bangladesh. Interestingly, with not a single critique of the BRI, the magazine could have well been funded by the CCP, indicating yet again, the pronounced Chinese academic influence in Bangladesh.²⁶ However, there are still others in Bangladesh who feel the inclination is over-hyped (Billah 2020) with many demonstrating a pro-India inclination as well.²⁷

2.2.2. Patterns and Character of China's Engagement of Academia in South Asia

2.2.2.1. Student Scholarships and Use of South Asian Outbound Students for Targeted Messages

Whether through scholarships or short-term visits to China, Beijing's reputation as a global education hub has successfully drawn students from South Asia, mostly due to their urge to be a part of China's phenomenal economic success story. While in the case of Australia, Canada, and the UK, Chinese students act as agents for furthering the Party's goal overseas, it is not so in South Asia. Instead of Chinese students being enablers of influence, in South Asia, regional students and faculty are largely playing the enabling role following their visits to Chinese universities for higher studies and as visiting scholars.

With respect to India, China's positive propaganda strategy is reflected in its eagerness to attract Indian students to China, ostensibly to expose the Indian youth to China's development, accomplishments and culture. This is in line with its soft power strategy and is a major feature of Chinese engagement in South Asia, not just in India, but also in Bangladesh and Nepal. Annually, China offers several scholarships to South Asian students. The scholarships range from Confucius scholarships, Chinese government scholarships offered by the China Scholarship Council, and bilateral scholarships offered by both the host government and the government of China. For India specifically, there are additional scholarships including the Institute of Chinese Studies-Harvard Yenching Institute (ICS-HYI) Joint Scholarship for Doctoral Research.²⁸

Scholarships are also important tools used by China to engage with Bangladeshi students. China has offered 162 full government scholarships to students from Bangladesh every year since 2013, in addition to annual short-term and long-term training programs (Study in China 2017). As of 2020, nearly 2673 students have availed themselves of these scholarships (Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the People's Republic of Bangladesh 2020). Notwithstanding the persistence of COVID-19, China has recently decided to set up a bilateral scholarship program to sponsor Bangladeshi students, teachers, and scholars to study and conduct research in Chinese universities. A further 53 Chinese Government Scholarships were added for the academic year 2021-2022 (Ibid).

²⁵ However, local resistance against Beijing's BRI is gradually gaining traction (*Mint* 2021).

²⁶ The funding of the magazine remains unknown.

²⁷ Author's interviews with a few Bangladeshi faculty.

²⁸ According to a professor in Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), New Delhi, the motivation behind the scholarship was Washington's eagerness to learn about China from an Indian perspective. Gathering non-Western perspectives on China is now a priority for US policymakers as Washington strategizes tackling a more aggressive China.

Individual universities from various Chinese provinces also offer scholarships to students in South Asia. For example, in 2018, the Yunnan provincial department of education at Dhaka organised the ‘Yunnan Higher Educational Exhibition 2018 and International Cooperation Seminar’, where several universities from the province participated and expressed interest in offering opportunities, including scholarships, to Bangladeshi students. Educational scholarships are also a major component of China’s outreach through the BRI (The Independent 2018) and populous countries in South Asia with large number of students looking to travel overseas, like in Bangladesh, are important in this regard. Beijing has been particularly attentive in showcasing itself to Islamic nations like Bangladesh by promoting Chinese university campuses as Muslim student-friendly through initiatives such as halal canteens in their premier universities (Borah 2018). This outreach strategy is likely intended to rebut criticism of Chinese authorities for maltreating Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang.

While China is the most preferred destination for Indian and Bangladeshi medical students (Consulate General of India 2021), for the latter it is also generally a ‘good option for higher studies’ (The Daily Star 2016). While China was undisputedly the preferred destination for higher education for Nepali students in 2016 (Mainali 2016), it continues to remain a favourite destination even now along with other countries like Australia and India (jdgrouppnepal 2012). Nepalese students are, in fact, exhorted by a local infotainment portal, Wap Nepal, to study in China instead of Western countries, including the US: ‘It is better to study in China with Chinese government scholarships rather than choosing abroad study like USA, Australia, Canada, Europe because you may spend thousands of dollars in your studies’ (<https://wapnepal.com.np/chinese-government-scholarships-nepali-students/>).

Indeed, students have become an important facilitator of Sino-Nepal relations. Annually, there are about 100 scholarships provided to Nepalese students for graduate-level courses in China with the candidates chosen mostly on the basis of their *public image and references from Nepalese politicians and even Chinese Embassy officials* (emphasis added).²⁹ This qualification perhaps demonstrate China’s intention to engage students who, in future, are likely to become influential in Nepal’s domestic political sphere and prove useful to the CCP for furthering its agenda in Nepal. China is already reaping significant strategic benefits in Nepal through student engagement with several Nepalese scholars reflecting that higher education has been China’s most important soft power tool in Nepal (Rana 2021).

China’s ostensible objective to use human resources, i.e. students and scholars, to further its regional influence is indeed noticeable in South Asia. This is clear from its efforts to present South Asian students with one-sided narratives – a dimension visible in Australia, Canada and the UK as well. However, in the latter countries, while these influence campaigns happen within foreign campuses, with respect to the former, the students are manipulated in Chinese university campuses. Also, these campaigns specifically offers window of opportunities to the CCP to advance non-Western perspectives on global issues, likely aimed to wean them away from the dominant Western narratives that they are conversant with. In fact, many visiting Indian students acknowledge the propagandist nature of Chinese lecture classes, which attempt to justify China and question the US-led world order (Pandya 2021), and even report that they are discouraged from asking ‘uncomfortable’ questions on controversial issues and prevented from posting critical WeChat messages on Chinese

²⁹ As obtained from the author’s interview with local experts.

systems. Students are also cautioned that criticism would invite poor grades, allotment of poor housing and reduction in fellowship funding (Ibid).

Student accounts of study in China also point to being incentivised to work for leading state-affiliated media agencies like CGTN and China Radio International (CRI), primarily for their English communication skills, which are largely used to project one-sided narratives favouring the Party (Pandya 2021). In some cases, these tactics appear to yield positive perceptions from Indian students. Upon return from Chinese fellowships, some students had positive feedback to offer on the scope of the BRI, sometimes even questioning the Indian position on the China project.³⁰ This perfectly serves the Chinese objective of using short-term visiting programs for promoting the advantages of the BRI while underplaying disadvantages such as its potential to lure countries into a ‘debt trap’³¹ (Carminati 2019).

Beijing’s manipulation also involves offering scholarships and training opportunities in human resource and skill development for Nepalese and Bangladeshi students, such as the Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) scholarship. Initiatives like these are again paying China strategic dividends. According to an official at the Technical and Madrasah (Islamic) Education Division (TMED) in Bangladesh, the ‘technical and vocational education system of our country is also indebted to China for their support programs in the last years’ (Xinhuanet 2019). It is therefore hardly surprising that China is robustly using scholarships, including short-term visiting fellowships, for influence in Nepal and Bangladesh.

Short-term visiting fellowships typically involve visiting China, interacting with the Chinese faculty, and, from time-to-time, learning the Chinese perspective on major issues like the BRI. For example, in 2013, the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS) in Sichuan University, Chengdu, one of the oldest South Asian Studies programs in China, launched several programs under the OBOR series and invited South Asian students to participate. This was one of the early examples of the use of the BRI and its engagement with students as a soft power tool (Boboc 2017) by the CCP to mobilise support for the initiative. In 2019, ISAS introduced a one-semester paid fellowship with a monthly stipend of RMB Yuan 3000 (US\$470), including free dormitory accommodation, to postgraduate students majoring in International Studies (inclusive of Regional Studies).³² It involved exchanges with students from South Asia and other countries to pursue IR courses taught in English, and elementary Chinese language training. With the international community increasingly wary over the geo-strategic implications of the BRI, Beijing aimed to position it as a project that would facilitate ‘a better cross-cultural dialogue, broad shared interests’ and a ‘deeper understanding of different localities in a world map of civilizations’ (Deqiang, Zhengrong 2017) to non-Chinese students. Thus, the BRI is a classic example of Beijing’s one-way communication with the overseas publics, impressing upon them its ‘non-threatening character’.

China’s influence is also being gradually felt in the online education space in India – an aspect not visible yet in Bangladesh or Nepal. With China already a global leader in EdTech, given its implementation of AI-based personalised learning solutions, and in line with its objective to influence the youth, Beijing’s penetration into India’s EdTech industry is discernible. Tencent, the Chinese technology conglomerate, has invested in BYJU’s (Gooptu 2019) – an Indian educational

³⁰ Ibid

³¹ It is a policy that encompasses burdening borrowing nations with excessive credit with the intention of extracting economic or political concessions from the debtor country when it finds it difficult to meet its debt repayment obligations.

³² As obtained from the author’s interview with local experts.

technology company – and the Doubtnut – another EdTech start-up. Beijing-based Legend Capital has also invested in Vedantu (The Economic Times 2020), another Indian education technology platform. These Chinese investments in the Indian education sector reflect the intention of using investments and financial clout for not only economic gain from India's large market, but also possible strategic influence among India's youth.

In Nepal, Chinese presence is also felt 'offline', through bookstores selling books and materials contributing to a one-sided narrative encouraged by the Party.³³ The Himalayan kingdom is also witnessing a surge in China study centres³⁴ – which are not officially funded by the Chinese government like the CIs – but might have some funding from China depending on the nature of their activities.³⁵ While information on the study centres remains limited, some of these centres, particularly in Nepal, do appear to play a role similar to CIs in outreach and propaganda.³⁶ In fact, such centres are engaged in active anti-India propaganda, underlining the critical role of Nepal in the India-China competition for strategic influence in South Asia (DNA 2014).³⁷ Many experts have even suggested that China, through these centres, is pushing an anti-India agenda (Singh 2020) as part of its overall influence campaign in Nepal.

With respect to Bangladesh, the author was unable to find any China study centre where Beijing has been actively involved.

2.2.2.2. Academic Fellowships

In addition to students, Beijing also seeks to charm South Asian faculty and experts. The BRI is one recent example which shows the Party's attempt to offer an alternative discourse on a project that has been criticized and opposed by adversaries like India. In November 2019, the *Xinhua* News Agency and Communication University of China organised an 'International Think Tank Experts' short-term Visiting Program in Beijing and Zhejiang province inviting experts from around 50 countries, including South Asia. The program was aimed at raising awareness and developing knowledge on the BRI. Policymakers, media personnel and various experts from across the world (including a faculty member from the Jindal Global University (JGU), who was interviewed by the author), and the government-funded think-tank Research and Information System for Developing World (RIS) were invited to visit China to attend the program. In fact, Indian experts from prominent think-tanks are regularly invited for such short-term visits to familiarise them with the country and its signature projects like the BRI.³⁸ Inviting senior experts and faculty from India in this context is clearly significant, as India has been a steadfast opposer of the BRI. In fact, many Indian faculty, who have been visiting China regularly on short fellowships, have been accused of demonstrating a bias in favour of China.³⁹

³³ Ibid

³⁴ Ibid

³⁵ Ibid

³⁶ Ibid

³⁷ There are, reportedly, 22 such China Study Centres, with 11 of them on the Indo-Nepal border, 'propagating subjects of Chinese culture, traditions, teachings and economy to the population in Nepal' (DNA 2014).

³⁸ As obtained from the author's interview with local experts.

³⁹ A faculty from a leading university in New Delhi accused a senior faculty at the same university and department as a Chinese spy, during an interview with the author, because he had pushed the candidature of a Chinese student from the mainland as opposed to other international students. The Chinese candidate was finally rejected under pressure from the others.

Indeed, there are also instances of research faculty from one of India's leading government-funded strategic policy think-tanks being invited to visit Beijing.⁴⁰ The policy of engagement worked well for some time in a complementary environment, with India, in the early years of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, exploring ways of facilitating engagement with Chinese think-tanks to better understand Chinese policies.⁴¹ The India-China Think-Tanks Forum,⁴² an annual event, was jointly organized by the ICS, Indian Council for World Affairs (ICWA), and the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS). Despite the environment having changed entirely following a sharp escalation in hostilities between the two countries post-Doklam standoff in 2017, think-tank visits have still taken place. In 2019, the ICWA visited China for Track II discussions. Most of the discussions focused on the trade imbalance, while there were also sessions on more benign issues, such as Buddhism and the silk route. However, discussions like these, from the Chinese side, have also tended to avoid sensitive political issues,⁴³ once again indicating their avoidance of 'hard' topics amidst military hostilities.

Interestingly, it is not the think-tank visits alone that have continued despite the military tension between India and China. Universities like the Ashoka have continued with fellowships like the China-India Visiting Scholars (CIVS) Fellowship.⁴⁴ While better understanding of China will surely expand strategic capacities for tackling China,⁴⁵ it is unclear whether the effort to engage with Chinese think tanks and universities is being encouraged by the Indian government. However, in current COVID-19 conditions, and given the contentious relationship between the two Asian juggernauts, fellowships like the CIVS are constrained by difficulties associated with travelling to China.

Beijing also sponsors short-term fellowships for Nepalese academia. Under the Chinese Culture Research Fellowship Scheme, Nepalese researchers are encouraged to conduct research on Chinese culture (*Wapnepal*) while basing themselves in China. There are short-term scholarships for foreign teachers of Chinese language as well, which cover the tuition fee, emergency medical care, general learning materials, accommodation, living allowance, a one-time settlement subsidy and inter-city travel allowance (Ibid). Interestingly, the Chinese Embassy in Nepal seems to play a major role when it comes to *referring* and *recommending* students and candidates from Nepal for these programs – a dimension also noted earlier with scholarships for Nepalese students.⁴⁶ Similar to students, the fellowships for the faculty appear to have served Chinese influence objectives better for Kathmandu than New Delhi. This is understandable given the

⁴⁰ During the interview with the author, a member of the team recalled the care taken by the Chinese Embassy in organizing the visit, including presence of senior Embassy officials on the trip, and prompt disbursement of cash for covering out-of-pocket expenses. The eye on details was understandable with the visit having been organized in the context of China drumming up support for BRI.

⁴¹ The first India-China Think-Tanks Forum was held in New Delhi in December 2016 for facilitating regular exchanges between the think tank communities of the two countries.

⁴² The Forum is a bilateral platform established by an MOU concluded between India's Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), and the CASS during the visit of Prime Minister Modi to China in May 2015 (<https://mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/27800/First+India+China+ThinkTanks+Forum+New+Delhi>).

⁴³ Author's interview with a participant.

⁴⁴ These are ten fellowships for academics, professionals, and policy experts interested in working on China.

⁴⁵ A view resonating among several academics and experts interviewed by the author. In fact, Section 4 will discuss this issue – knowing China better – in a little more detail.

⁴⁶ According to an interviewee from Nepal, 'there used to be several fully sponsored exposure visits organized for the journalists, academia, and civil society members including politicians prior to the pandemic. These visits used to last from a week to a month, and participants were selected through *referrals and internal screening from the embassy*'.

conditions surrounding China's ties with India and the latter's much greater strategic prominence. For New Delhi though, Beijing appears to have had more success in positively impacting students than experts; whether that has contributed to expanding its overall influence, is of course debatable.

In the case of Bangladesh, Beijing has emerged a sympathetic donor for funding academic projects and research. In a fiscally difficult environment, where applying for government funds is grueling, Chinese funds are not only generous but also come with no major paperwork. These academics, benefiting from Chinese funding, are indebted to China, with many reluctant to admit Chinese growing academic interference.⁴⁷

2.2.2.3. Conferences, Training Programs, and Seminars

As with most of the world, China also has joint faculty training programs and seminars with South Asia designed to teach courses on China. One such program was conceived by the United Board located in the US and Harvard-Yenching Institute in 2017 for preparing undergraduate teachers to teach Chinese and courses on China in Indian colleges. With the support of Christ University in Bangalore, the first training workshop was conducted in January 2018 with 16 faculty members from nine colleges and universities across different parts of India.⁴⁸ The workshop succeeded in introducing a comprehensive background on developments in modern China to the Indian faculty and provided them with an informed understanding of contemporary China – again an effort to familiarise Indian academics about China from a Chinese perspective.

The Chinese Embassies in South Asia also play major roles in organizing conferences and seminars which are often forums for China to dominate and cooperate at the same time. For instance, in 2021, to mark the centenary of the founding of the CCP the Chinese Embassy in India held an online seminar themed 'Sharing Experience on Party-Building, Promoting Exchanges and Cooperation' (<http://kolkata.china-consulate.org/eng/zlgxw/t1895815.htm>). According to a young participant from India, 'the Chinese side tried to influence the narrative in both diplomatic and hard ways. It appeared it was deliberate and pre-decided. One Chinese academic used a hard strategy while another towed a softer and diplomatic tone on issues of World Trade Organization cooperation, trade deficit, Chinese investment (in infrastructure and construction) that was suspended by India'.⁴⁹

2.2.2.4. Chinese Students and Faculty

Compared to Western countries, India, Bangladesh, and Nepal can hardly boast of having a significant number of Chinese students studying in their universities. From the Chinese perspective, South Asian universities have far less 'pull' for Chinese students who prefer Western education. Low numbers of Chinese students in South Asia could also be due to the Chinese impression of being 'superior' to South Asian countries, including India, which have smaller economies and lower capacities in technological, military and other strategic resources.

The few students from China studying in these countries, at least in India, are learning culture and Indian languages, primarily Hindi.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ As obtained from the author's interview with local experts.

⁴⁸ Author had interviewed a JNU faculty participant who had attended this workshop in Bangalore.

⁴⁹ Author's interview with the participant.

⁵⁰ There are currently 500 Chinese students in China learning Hindi in Chinese universities (*DD News* 2021). The author's interviews further revealed that a lot of Indian language schools have also come up in China as well. For engagement or otherwise, getting to know each other is important. That requires knowledge of local languages.

The School of Languages in JNU, and the Visva-Bharati⁵¹ in India, for example, continue to attract Chinese students, though they are few in numbers. According to a professor interviewed from Visva-Bharati, ‘there were regular students from China who visited the university and there were Indian students too who went to China to study before COVID-19’. The number of Chinese faculty in these universities are negligible – again, distinct compared with Australia, Canada and the UK.⁵² Despite the small number of inbound Chinese students, and Visva-Bharati have had regular inflow of Chinese faculty from various parts of China visiting the universities. These faculty members teach spoken Chinese, correct the Indian students’ composition and essays and teach them about Chinese culture.⁵³ In fact, prominent Indian universities have also appointed Chinese professors as their teaching faculty. Unfortunately, there are also alleged reports that these professors have engaged in clandestine espionage (Yadav 2020), which the author was unable to verify.

There is also a regular flow of Chinese faculty who visit premier Indian think tanks. Chinese research professor, Qiu Yonghui from Sichuan University came to Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies Analyses, Delhi, in 2019 to discuss controversial issues like India-China relations and regional security (<https://idsa.in/idsanews/qiu-yonghui-of-sichuan-university-discusses-india-china-relations>). Apart from research professors, there are also young research scholars who come to India to gain insight on specific topics such as caste politics, state economies, cultural and business linkages, and the media. In fact, Chinese students coming to India have been asked by Beijing to focus on important states like Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Bihar (Patil 2017). This once again indicates the Chinese state’s intent to know more about India for strategic and business reasons. However, in this case, the objective seems to be focused more on understanding, rather than influencing.

For Nepal and Bangladesh, the number of inbound Chinese students and faculty is similarly negligible. With respect to Nepal, interviews revealed that researchers and students typically came to study Buddhism. However, with respect to Bangladesh, the information provided in the interviews did not provide insight in this area.

2.2.3. China’s Soft Power?

The question remains: has China’s soft power really worked? Or is China keen on cultivating a ‘benign’ image in the region, including with India? The evidence suggests that unlike in the West, where China has focused more on *forcing* alternative narratives and containing anti-China views by intimidating and censoring sensitive issues inimical to Chinese national interests, in South Asia, the strategy seems more discreet. China’s advancement of its own perspectives on issues like the BRI is more restrained, particularly in India. In fact, its attempt to cultivate goodwill in the region persists. In Bangladesh and Nepal, China’s economic and strategic significance, coupled with its generous infrastructure and development funding, has spurred considerable goodwill. This is true even for India, notwithstanding Beijing’s border spats, with military incursions having become a regular phenomenon.

⁵¹ The *Cheena Bhavana* at the Visva Bharati university is the oldest centre of Sino-Indian cultural studies in India. Established in 1937, it was built by Rabindranath Tagore – the first non-European to win the Nobel Prize in literature in 1913 and Tan Yun-Shan – a Chinese scholar.

⁵² Visva-Bharati currently has a Chinese faculty from Fujian (South China) while the JGU has two Chinese faculty at their India-China Studies.

⁵³ Author’s interview with a faculty.

In India, Nepal, and Bangladesh, the case indeed seems different from the West, with a large number of students enrolled in their home universities to learn about China. Experts point to the rising interest in studying Chinese during recent years.⁵⁴ The interest clearly reflects the ‘pull’ enjoyed by China among Indian students. The rising interest has largely been a result of new economic opportunities for those who can speak Mandarin. Many of these opportunities arose from the growth of tourist traffic between India and East and Southeast Asia. Buddhist tourists, who are predominantly ethnic Chinese and prefer local tour guides who know Mandarin, are an important segment of tourists from the region to India. Additionally, since the 1990s, several American and European companies have set up back-office operations and call centers in India. The call-centers prefer recruits who know foreign languages, including Chinese, for catering to a global customer base. Understanding China has also become critical to India’s strategic perspective, encouraging young graduates to learn the Chinese language, culture, history, polity and economics. Many of these students have gone on to pursue PhD programs in Chinese Studies in leading Indian universities like JNU.

With student interest on China rising, more centres and institutes focused on China have emerged in South Asia. In India, major state-funded universities like JNU and the Viswa-Bharati have been engaged in Chinese studies for decades, but other institutes have also begun their own independent China programs. The Indian Institute of Management (IIM), Shillong, in India’s North-eastern region, has a dedicated program *Managing Business in India and China* with exchange arrangements with the School of Management at Fudan University, Shanghai (<https://iimshillong.ac.in/programs-iims/pgpex.html>). The Indian Institute for Technology (IIT) Madras also has a Centre on China – the IIT Madras China Studies Centre (<https://csc.iitm.ac.in/13th-all-india-conference-of-china-studies-aiccs/>). Young private universities like Ashoka University and JGU also have Centers for China Studies and India-China Studies respectively, highlighting the prominence of China in area study programs in India. These universities also collaborate with Chinese universities and offer fellowships to academics and policymakers for visiting China and expanding their research on the country (<https://ashoka.edu.in/page/CIVSF-278>).

Apart from large Indian metropolises like Delhi, Mumbai, Chennai, and Kolkata, China Studies Centres have also cropped up in smaller cities (e.g. Dehradun in Uttarakhand, Solapur in Maharashtra). The interest on China in these relatively smaller cities is partly an attempt to attract Chinese investments. There are reports of students from India’s deep hinterland looking to engage China to obtain funds that would create jobs under the ‘Make in India’⁵⁵ initiative (Patil 2017).⁵⁶ China’s benign image also appears to be gaining traction in India’s smaller towns and cities.⁵⁷ Interest on China is increasingly spreading deep and wide within India, as seen from the ICS holding a session in Marathi⁵⁸ in its annual China conference in 2017.

⁵⁴ Author’s interview with a professor at the Visva-Bharati university in Bengal, India. From a mere 15 students in 1991, the number of students studying Chinese at the university have increased to 170 at present. Similar views were expressed by a Chinese language faculty from the JNU.

⁵⁵ Make in India is an initiative by the Indian Government to make and encourage companies to manufacture in India and incentivise dedicated investments into manufacturing.

⁵⁶ Patil (2017) mentions an Indian student from a small town in Maharashtra, visiting Sri Lanka, and being impressed by the ‘Chinese influence there’ which ‘surpassed India’s’. The student was keen on organising academic events on China in his college for highlighting China’s potential of contributing to ‘Make in India’.

⁵⁷ China offered humanitarian assistance to drought-hit Solapur in 2016 and is keen on contributing to its efforts to develop as a smart city (Patil 2017).

⁵⁸ Marathi is the local language in Maharashtra.

In Nepal, apart from Study centres on China (e.g. Chinese Study Centre [CSC] in Kathmandu), there are several think-tanks focusing on China as well.⁵⁹ Most of these think tanks reportedly receive some funding from Beijing.⁶⁰ They are also mostly headed by local academic experts closely familiar with China. Local business leaders with connections to China also feature in these outfits.⁶¹ While the latter are hardly into in-depth research, and primarily conduct events on China and the BRI, they also seem to be designed to contribute to advancing China's soft power. This is evident from their predominantly event-specific existence. While many of these events target local academics and politicians – favourably inclined to China – to speak in these forums, they are continuously *monitored by the Embassy officials* (emphasis added).⁶² The intent to monitor the content of public events reflects Beijing's increasing confidence in displaying its active role in shaping the local discourse on China – in what is a significant departure from a gentle unobtrusive soft power approach to build goodwill.

With respect to Bangladesh, its leaning on Beijing has grown over time, with more academics displaying a positive perception of Beijing (Sakahwat 2020). Bangladesh has also been witnessing the rise of Chinese language schools which could have been funded by Beijing.⁶³ While Chinese study centres are still limited in number,⁶⁴ Beijing's 'pull' appears to be increasing. Apart from being the largest supplier of defence items, China's well-known financial clout is entrenched in Bangladesh, making it the quintessential 'sticky' power or the power of economic attraction.⁶⁵ In fact, during the ongoing pandemic, not only was China able to establish itself as a friend extending a hand of sympathy and support to Bangladesh, but its handling of the crisis was seen *as setting an example* which the world should follow (Ibid).

⁵⁹ These include Nepal Institute for Strategic Studies (<https://niss.org.np/category/news-and-events/>), Nepal China Himalayan Friendship Society (<https://www.facebook.com/NeCHiFS/>), Nepal China Friendship Forum (<https://www.facebook.com/nccfforum/>), Nepal Institute for International Cooperation and Engagement (<https://www.facebook.com/contactniice/>) and Araniko Society (<https://www.arnikosociety.com.np>)

⁶⁰ Author's interviews with Nepalese experts.

⁶¹ Views obtained from author's interview with Nepalese experts.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Views obtained from author's interviews with Bangladeshi experts.

⁶⁴ The East Asia Study Center at the Dhaka University has a China Affairs Program (CAP). The Bangladesh Institute for Peace and Strategic Studies (BIPSS) has the Bangladesh Centre for China Studies (BCCS) which aims to 'partner with Think Tanks and universities in China as well as other institutes elsewhere focusing on China' (<https://bipss.org.bd/bccs/>).

⁶⁵ As revealed by author's interview with Bangladeshi scholars.

3. EXAMINING THE ROLE OF CIS IN INDIA, BANGLADESH, AND NEPAL FOR GENERATING CHINA'S SOFT POWER

Since the time CIs were launched, they have been used to spread key strategic messages to the international community. In 2004, the CIs' propagation began from South Korea, a US ally. South Korea was carefully and deliberately chosen as the venue for a message targeting the international community, particularly the West: 'China was back into the "first-world club" after a century of semi-colonial status and 50 years of third world membership' (Starr 2009).

Over time, CIs began posing more as propaganda arms of the government. Given the CCP-driven mandate of the CIs – to influence foreign perceptions in different parts of the world⁶⁶ – it can perhaps be argued that the functioning of these institutes seem to underscore their development as a component of the larger Chinese coercive diplomacy strategy. This strategy includes China's deliberate influence operations to change the perceptions of local academia, in what is a clear departure from soft power intended to promote goodwill. Matt Schrader, a China analyst with the German Marshall Fund, prefers to call the CIs 'propaganda tools' since they pose as 'platforms for an authoritarian party that's fundamentally hostile to liberal ideas like free speech and free inquiry to propagate a state-approved narrative' (Jakhar 2019). He further asserts: 'and since the Communist Party of China doesn't have a free press or rule of law to check its use of power, it's no surprise there have been strong indications that CIs are used for inappropriate covert activities like intelligence gathering and facilitating military research' (Ibid). However, China's ambitions in using the CIs in South Asia – particularly with respect to India, Bangladesh and Nepal – seem quite different from its practise in the West, as will be discussed later in this section.

This section will draw on an earlier body of work on CIs and soft power in other countries (Australia, Canada and the UK), including the author's book, *Analysing China's Soft Power Strategy and Comparative Indian Initiatives*. Unlike in influence operations where the literature is scant, there is relatively more work available on CIs and their evolving strategies in different countries, particularly in the West. These institutes have been researched heavily, drawing considerable international spotlight since they were launched by Beijing in 2004. They have been both controversial⁶⁷ and benign depending on their activities in the country where they are based – a dimension the author has dealt with in detail in her book. Her research had identified Beijing's reluctance to push CIs and cultural engagement in South Asia, which could be deliberate and tactical. While for India, the Chinese government found it hard to impress the virtuousness of the CIs from the beginning, given their identification as Chinese state actors in the wake of the India-China border dispute, in the rest of South Asia, the low-profile of CIs was partly due to India's overwhelming cultural and strategic presence (Sinha Palit 2017):

'the absence of a sizeable Chinese diaspora in the region (except for a small community in Kolkata in the Eastern part of India,⁶⁸ which might well be more

⁶⁶ According to *Hanban* (2013), there were 80 CIs in North America and 108 in Europe. Asia has a total of 83 with the largest number of CIs located in Korea (17) and Japan (13). http://english.hanban.org/node_10971.htm (29 August 2013). South Asia has a total number of 6-7 CIs but unfortunately these numbers cannot be verified.

⁶⁷ Perhaps given the raging controversies around the CIs, the *Hanban*, in July 2020, announced its renaming to the Center for Language Education and Cooperation, stating that 'the Confucius Institute was handed over to the Chinese International Education Foundation a self-described 'non-governmental private organization' (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Confucius_Institute).

⁶⁸ A project called 'Cha' (meaning tea in both Bengali and Chinese) is underway to revive one of the world's oldest Chinese settlements outside mainland China in *Tiretta Bazar* and *Tangra* in Kolkata. An initiative by the

‘Indian’ than Chinese), in contrast to a much larger diaspora in other parts of Asia that has been particularly useful in harnessing China’s cultural initiatives. Another important factor could be the overarching and deep-rooted influence of the Indian cultural influence in the region. The Indian culture is indeed as ‘formidable’ as its Chinese counterpart, in terms of long history, rich tradition and variety, with both being distinct in their attributes from the Western culture. The similarity between the Chinese and Indian cultures in their emphasis on common core values of sympathy, accommodation, respect and tolerance makes it unproductive for China to re-emphasize these in a region already familiar with their nuances. Buddhism, for example, while stitching Bhutan, Nepal, Sri Lanka and China in a common thread, acts identically in linking India and parts of Southeast Asia, thereby reducing its exclusivity as a cultural tool for China in connecting to South Asia’.

Unlike their limited penetration in South Asia, the CIs’ interventions and propaganda in the West has been substantial, with the US even designating the Confucius Institute US Center (CIUS) a ‘foreign mission’ of the Chinese government and identifying it for its role as ‘an entity advancing Beijing’s global propaganda and malign influence campaign on US campuses and K-12 classrooms’ (Green-Riley 2020). Australia, Canada and the UK have been similarly encountering problems with the CIs – a dimension discussed hereafter.

3.1. The Idea of CIs

Beijing has never hesitated to make use of its long history, including invoking Confucian teachings and doctrines which they had once rejected⁶⁹ but later adopted for connecting to the outside world. Confucian thought provided representative tenets of a ‘global’ doctrine of humanity and harmony that the CPC was comfortable in identifying with and projecting to the world. Consequently, Confucius was not only espoused as the CCP’s main arm of cultural diplomacy but also as a bridge to reinforce friendship and partnership with the rest of the world. The brand was also expected to help connect China with ethnic Chinese around the world while ‘pulling in’ the unfamiliar and uninitiated with its non-ideological flavour (Sinha Palit 2017). Li Changchun, then one of the nine members of the Standing Committee of Politburo of the CCP, in charge of ideology and propaganda, noted that CIs are ‘an important channel to glorify Chinese culture, to help Chinese culture spread to the world’ (Meng Meng 2012).

Modeled after France’s *Alliance Francaise*, Germany’s *Goethe Institut* and the United Kingdom’s British Council, and following the functional guidelines of the *Hanban* affiliated with China’s MOE, the CIs have strong financial resources due to the funding they receive from the Chinese government and are developed in collaboration with host institutions and universities overseas. Actively engaged in Public Diplomacy through a variety of tasks ranging from teaching Mandarin and offering courses on Chinese art and culture to organizing multiple cultural activities for people-to-people exchanges, the implicit strategic objective of the CIs at their creation was to seek a benign image for China. A benign image would not only mute international concerns regarding its ‘rise’ but also facilitate an enabling external environment for China to re-emerge. However, over time, the CIs became

Singaporean conglomerate, it has a large number of Kolkata-born Singaporeans on board, many of whom are of Chinese origin from Tangra. (Pandey 2014).

⁶⁹ China’s anti-Confucian campaign during the early 1970s was aimed to reject Confucian values of idealism, humanism and conservatism on the one hand while attacking a continuation of the communist effort to eradicate traditional habits and attitudes on the other (Goldman 1975).

propagandist and aggressive. They have been branded ‘as little more than a public relations tools designed to foster influence and control events on foreign campuses’ (Ellsworth 2020).

3.1.1. Academic Interference through CIs: Australia, Canada and the UK

Australia, Canada and UK – all mature democracies with academic freedom and cultures of free-flowing debates and discussions on sensitive issues of global and national importance – have expressed concern over the interference of CIs in their university campuses and have become increasingly suspicious of their mandate. Posing as ‘extensions of the Chinese government that censor certain topics and perspectives in course materials on political grounds, and use hiring practices that take political loyalty into consideration’ (HRW 2019), CIs in most of the developed world are seen to be threatening global academia. Thus, the reaction from many host countries has been to limit CIs.

Initially perceived as ‘a means of enhancing Chinese language and culture education and facilitating connections to China’ (Gil 2020), the Chinese government has more recently used CIs to exert pressure in several countries, including Australia, Canada and the UK. Australia, which had at first encouraged CIs in its university campuses,⁷⁰ now perceives them as a threat to its institutions, universities and schools, even deciding to close them down. Trouble with CIs in Canada⁷¹ and the US⁷² was partly responsible for the institutes coming under scrutiny in Australia. A turning point for Canberra arose in 2018, when the New South Wales government decided to review and eventually close the CI located in the state’s Department of Education and the CCs attached to it. The Australian government had increasingly begun to feel the CCP’s exertion of influence through the CIs which ‘organise and control the over 200,000 Chinese students studying’ there (*Advance Australia* 2020).

In Canada, discomfort grew around the CI’s mandate – presenting a ‘one-dimensional’ view of China and influencing students to perceive the country only in a positive light – with their numbers eventually dropping from 15 to 10 (Ellsworth 2020). In fact, Chinese teachers in CIs in Canada were reportedly trained to reflect Chinese official positions on issues like Tibet and Falun Gong⁷³ (Blackwell 2020). Suspicion over mandate and motive also led to the CC in New Brunswick, UK coming under scrutiny in 2019 (Connolly 2019). A major concern was that the teachers were not only blacklisting topics that cast China negatively and confining themselves to teaching topics approved by the CCP, but the CCs were also being used as spy satellite offices by China (Fowler 2019). The Foreign Affairs Select Committee of the UK in 2019 also highlighted the role of China-funded CI officials confiscating papers that mentioned *Taiwan* at an academic conference, the use of the *Chinese Students and Scholars Association* as an instrument of political interference and evidence that

⁷⁰ The first CI came up at the University of Western Australia in 2005. Their numbers soon climbed to 14 with another 67 CCs. The latter are CI equivalents located in primary and secondary schools, seeking to establish or enhance Chinese language and culture programs for international students.

⁷¹ A public protest against CCs erupted in Toronto, Canada, in 2014. Parents and community members carried signs with messages such as ‘Don’t Poison Your Kids and Mine With Communism!’, ‘No Communist CI in TDSB’ and ‘I Don’t Want Communist Chinese Textbook’ (Gil 2018).

⁷² *The Washington Post*, in an editorial (21 June 2014), had listed concerns about CIs, including an advise to universities to cut ties with CIs over alleged violations of freedom of speech and human rights.

⁷³ Founded in the mainland in 1992, the spiritual group’s growing popularity began to be regarded as a challenge to the CCP rule. It was subsequently banned in 1999.

dissidents were active while studying in the UK (Wintour 2019). These actions indicate Beijing's increasing tendency to 'coerce' to reap larger strategic dividends.

As China exerts more muscle in its external engagement, the CIs' goal to seek a benign image seems to have been relegated to the background with the distinct preference of a harder and more belligerent image. This preference has led Beijing to use CIs as a weapon to spy, compromise academic freedom, spread propaganda, encourage self-censorship on sensitive issues and exert influence on schools, universities and governments overseas (Gil 2018). Indeed, suspicions over the influence role of CIs have been responsible, *inter alia*, for deepening mistrust and a rise in bilateral tensions between China and Australia, Canada and the UK. The CIs and the CCs – 'soft power' tools which were perhaps initially designed by China for enhanced engagement, assuaging bilateral tensions, and for forging deeper partnership with other countries across the world – seem to have lost their utility with China's increasing geo-political and geostrategic clout, from where China appears to be relying more on a policy of dictating terms.

3.2. CIs in India, Bangladesh, and Nepal: Only Arms of Beijing's Propaganda?

The CIs in South Asia, particularly in Nepal and Bangladesh, appear to be more in line with Beijing's original soft power strategy. Beijing's employment of soft power tools, meant for achieving goals like *harmony*, *cooperation*, and *collaboration*, are still emphasised in both South Asian countries. Nonetheless, alongside these goals, their mandate seems to also encompass *influencing* and *changing* the target state's behaviour as well, somewhat similar to what has been witnessed in Australia, Canada and the US, but in a more low-profile manner. It will be interesting to note if in the future the CIs are employed in Bangladesh and Nepal in a more coercive manner. If they indeed become central to *influence operations* targeted at academia in these two countries, then their roles will have changed considerably from cultivating goodwill. The Indian context, though, is different. Not only are the CIs in India few, but they have also been under the government scanner post-Galwan crisis in 2020. The following section discusses how these institutes have been discouraged in India with suspicion and mistrust directing the academic discourse on China.

3.2.1. CIs in India: Discouraged and Limited

India has very few functioning CIs⁷⁴ and the few that exist are looked at with scepticism. According to many diplomats, India has always been 'ahead of the curve' (Haider, Jebaraj 2020) in anticipating China's influence intentions given the awareness among the diplomatic and intelligence communities of the CCP's influence operations and discreet agenda since their launch. In 2013, Ajit Doval, India's current National Security Adviser (NSA), wrote an article titled 'Chinese Intelligence: From a Party Outfit to Cyber Warriors' in which he highlighted the Chinese Ministry of State Security's (MSS) penetration in the Indian government, particularly the education department (Gupta 2020). Subsequently, the government and policymakers' reservations with respect to CIs have been noteworthy, with the Doklam faceoff and Galwan skirmish further distancing the two neighbours. Following the Galwan faceoff between the two countries in May 2020, India's Ministry of Education

⁷⁴ According to the *Hanban* website, there are three CIs in India (University of Mumbai, Vellore Institute of Technology and the Lovely Professional University) and a few CCs (School of Chinese Language Kolkata, Bharathiar University, and KR Mangalam University) (Krishnan 2020). However, their functionality remains a question, except for the one in Mumbai University. The author was able to connect with an academic from the Mumbai university who was directly dealing with the CI there. However, the author was unable to find out whether the other two CIs are at all functional.

wrote to several universities seeking details about the activities of the CIs and CCs (Haidar, Jebaraj 2020). While cultural exchanges and economic collaboration with China has remained a priority for every Indian government in power, CIs and CCs have been looked at with suspicion in New Delhi from the very beginning.

In fact, most academics and scholars were reluctant to discuss CIs during interviews, with many refusing to fill in the questionnaire that the author had mailed them. This could be due to several reasons. First, the close monitoring of CIs and other Centres on China by the government (Haider, Kallol 2017) has made them unappealing subjects of discussion. Furthermore, the current environment of mistrust towards China is clearly impacting the inclination of academics to talk about these Chinese state-backed institutes. Finally, discussion on China and CIs is not widely welcomed by the academic community, who fear that these interactions might produce unnecessary controversies, complicating the situation even further for them, since state scrutiny has been upped post-Galwan.⁷⁵

3.2.2. CIs in Nepal: Instruments to Cultivate Goodwill?

Nepal hosts two CIs – one at the Kathmandu University (KU) and the other at the Tribhuvan University (TU) – and their influence has been significant in cultivating goodwill with very little criticism of their role in Nepalese academia. The CI at the KU has established four CCs and 14 teaching sites in the country. It has also established favourable cooperative relations with other Chinese universities, while increasing teaching venues locally. While regulating the management system, they have even enhanced the teaching level and successfully *influenced* other aspects (emphasis added) (Rana 2021). This not only indicates the growing influence of CIs in Nepal but also demonstrates Beijing's intent to push its benign image through these institutes.

The CIs are perceived as important vehicles for promoting greater understanding of China in countries like Nepal and Bangladesh and highlighting China's increasing role in regional development, and they appear to be yielding positive results (CCTV 2009). Sometimes, the CIs capitalize on other Chinese soft power activities, in effect, to double their influence. For example, the CIs in Nepal often organize trips for Nepalese students to survey China-assisted projects, like the Birendra International Convention Centre (BICC) and the Civil Service Hospital of Nepal, to highlight their commitment to Nepal's infrastructure development and thereby cultivate a favourable image (Sinha Palit 2017). These initiatives organized by the CIs seem to be effective, given the favourable impression on the Nepalese youth. A young Nepalese student, *born in India and educated at the Bangalore University*, wrote after one such visit: "Today, we felt so good to see the things provided by Chinese govt. As we say, seeing is believing. This trip means a lot to us. We could see the generosity of Chinese government, the quality management of Confucius Institute..." (Ibid).

Impressing, though, does not seem to be the only objective of the CIs, as the institutes also conduct purposeful training programs for their students. For example, the CI at the KU teaches courses on vehicle maintenance to enable students to work in Chinese infrastructure projects in the country (Balachandran 2018). This effort again underlines China's economic interest in Nepal and utilization of local skills for larger economic benefits. CIs based out of Nepal also try to establish business links with China, apart from familiarizing the Nepalese students with China. In fact, the CIs combine their initiatives with certain China-funded China Study Centres – for instance with the centre at

⁷⁵ Author's interview with scholars.

Jhapa – to explore bilateral business opportunities (Sinha Palit 2017) while continuing to organize academic seminars and planning youth delegations to visit China.

According to one interviewee, the Chinese Embassy also plays a dominant role in the functioning of the CIs in Nepal – for example, distributing the Nepali edition of *Xi Jinping: The Governance of China*, which offers insight into the Chinese President's ideological and political views, policies, programs and governance arrangements, and their successful implementation (*China Daily* 2021). Such events, organised by the Embassy, are well-received with prominent local leaders like the Nepalese President attending and participating (Ibid).

3.2.3. CIs in Bangladesh: Job Prospects

Bangladesh, an economy transitioning from the status of a least-developed country to a developing one, is impressed by Beijing's development model and economic success. China's economic dynamism and prospective opportunities continue to attract the Bangladeshi youth, with the local academia taking keen interest in China's positive economic transformation. According to a faculty member (Ahmed 2016):

In 35 years, China has accomplished at least three significant transformations, in particular: a) a transformation from planned economy to a market economy; b) a transformation from an agrarian to an industrialised society and c) a transformation from a closed economy to a largely open economy integrated with the world.

The above positive perception provides an enabling environment for CIs. There are two CIs in Bangladesh, including the first CI established in South Asia, located at the North South University in Dhaka, in collaboration with Yunnan University. The second CI is at Dhaka University. With more Bangladeshi students eager to learn Mandarin, not only CIs, but CRI and Shanto Mariam Foundation CC have been offering language programs as well. The CI at the North South University is already a major destination for Chinese language learners in Bangladesh. The non-profit educational and research institution is also working to promote Chinese language and culture, as well as academic exchanges between the two countries.

The CI at the University also offers opportunities for advanced study in China under the Chinese government and CI scholarship programs, which are a major draw for Bangladeshi youth. It is evident that scholarships to pursue higher education in China (Soofi 2019) and the subsequent job opportunities – both in China and Bangladesh – have contributed to Beijing's reputation as a benign power keen on engaging the Bangladeshi youth. According to a Bangladeshi Mandarin learner: 'Learning Chinese helped me a lot as demand of Chinese-speaking lawyer on rise in the country due to growing trade link up with China' (*China Daily* 2009). Another student was hopeful about a Chinese scholarship: 'I hope I will get a scholarship for further studies in Chinese language after completing my graduation. Being skilled in both English and Chinese languages, I want to be a Chinese teacher. Besides, there are many options of getting a job with a good salary in many Chinese multinational companies working in our country' (Debnath 2018).

4. TACKLING INFLUENCE

4.1. Countering Beijing's Interference in Academia: A Priority for Australia, Canada, and the UK

Australia, Canada, and the UK have been contemplating measures to bolster academic integrity at their institutions in the face of China's undue influence. Reports of Australian scientists having collaborated with Chinese universities to carry out military research beneficial to the People's Liberation Army – some of it funded by Australian taxpayers – has alarmed both the Australian government and other countries like Canada (Dyer 2020). According to these reports, much of the research found its way into new Chinese weapons systems or surveillance networks employed by the Chinese regime (Ibid). As a result, countering Beijing's academic interference and its influence campaigns has become a national priority for most Western governments, including Canada and the UK, who view Australia's policies as worth emulating. Australia's economic reliance on China, especially in its higher education, has also demonstrated the downsides of relying on China for academic funding, serving as an interesting case study for other countries facing a similar conundrum.

Defining 'foreign interference' as an 'activity that is coercive, clandestine or corrupting, and distinct from the normal lobbying activity of a foreign government', Australia passed its first foreign interference law in 2018 (*The Straits Times* 2021) primarily targeting Beijing. But Beijing's discreet surveillance tactics targeting academic institutions in Australia carried on, with the Australian National University confirming in 2019 that it had been the target of a massive data hack with personal information of 200,000 students and staff stolen. The government soon created the University Foreign Interference Taskforce, comprising of intelligence agencies, education bureaucrats and university leaders, aimed at strengthening the cyber defences of universities (BBC 2019). The Taskforce, apart from developing safeguards to help universities protect their research and intellectual property, also looked at ensuring more 'transparency' in foreign academic collaborations (Ibid). In fact, the following year, Australia was even seeking powers to scrap agreements that its state governments reached with foreign powers. For example, the federal government was keen on reviewing an agreement signed by the Victoria government and Beijing under the BRI (*Business Standard* 2020). This year – once again to bolster its academic freedom and prevent 'forced' transfer of technology – and before international students return to Australia with borders now expected to open, Canberra toughened foreign interference rules for universities even further to stop self-censorship on campuses and the covert transfer of sensitive technology (Ibid).⁷⁶

The Australian government has come up with new laws requiring foreign organisations like the CIs to identify their state connections publicly on a government register. The foreign interference angle also became pressing for the New South Wales state government, forcing it to cancel the CI's contracts to teach Chinese language programs in public schools. Subsequently, two Australian universities announced reviews of their research and funding collaborations, following reports that their researchers may have unwittingly collaborated with a Chinese-state owned military technology company accused of human rights abuses (Ibid). A similar trend was noticed in the UK as well. In early 2021, around 200 British academics from more than 12 universities in the UK, were suspected of unknowingly breaching export laws designed to prevent intellectual property in highly sensitive

⁷⁶ The new guidelines may not name China, but feature case studies that parallel incidents involving China and its pressure tactics and intimidation involving the Australian academia (*The Straits Times* 2021).

subjects from being handed to hostile states like China (*Al Jazeera* 2021). This kind of espionage related to defence and security by Beijing has alarmed the international community with Canberra, Ottawa, and London, all determined to counter Beijing's subversive actions on its campuses.

With CCP-backed Chinese students attempting to stifle academic freedom in universities, as discussed in Section 2, Australia has even been considering levying a disciplinary offence against students if they are found recording classes on controversial issues or sharing them with outside groups. Allowing students to submit written assignments under pseudonyms (*The Guardian* 2021) to protect freedom of speech and expression within campuses is also being contemplated. Australian academic leadership is even planning to encourage assignments in hard copies amid growing concerns about foreign government-linked harassment over politically sensitive topics (*Ibid*).

Australia's efforts to curtail interference and protect academic independence within its universities is mirrored by similar efforts in the UK. The UK, like Australia, is increasingly wary of universities unwittingly helping companies with strong links to the CCP. For instance, the UK has closed down CIs (Jakhar 2019) that have been under investigation by the Australian government since 2017, especially institutes that were unregistered and yet present on many campuses (*Business Standard* 2020). To protect valuable research assets from 'hostile actors' (like China), the UK government has created a new unit called the Research Collaboration Advice Team for providing confidential advice on topics such as export controls, cyber security and protection of intellectual property to researchers before they enter into any international collaborations (Kelly 2021). In a further effort to tighten rules around sensitive subjects and to prevent Chinese students from pursuing those topics, the UK expanded the Academic Technology Approval Scheme (ATAS)⁷⁷ to cover military technology, in order to ensure that its regulatory safeguards were updated to keep up with contemporary global threats (*Reuters* 2020).

Among the Middle Powers discussed in this paper, Canada, however, is yet to implement policies to counter China's influence in its academia as widely as Australia and the UK. Canadian resistance to China's academic manipulation is still in its early stage. Many critics argue that Canada has not only been behind the international curve in scrutinizing China's 'clandestine' tactics, but has also been behaving as 'a kind of a sleepy and unaware target' despite warning signs of China's incursions (Cooper 2020). However, there has been a growing academic apprehension about Beijing's possible attempt to transfer technology to the Chinese military from Canadian think-tanks and universities. According to the University of Waterloo's Vice-President of Research, 'her university's focus on science and engineering makes it naturally attractive to Chinese researchers, citing artificial intelligence and robotics as two areas of particularly strong cooperation' (Dyer 2020). This fear of CCP-backed espionage by Chinese research staff working in Canadian scientific research institutes is gradually disconcerting Ottawa, with certain measures being adopted to counter Beijing's intrusions. Leaders and academics are contemplating adopting legislation like Australia's 'Espionage and Foreign Interference Act' for addressing gaps in their national security. They are also keen on introducing a system to register foreign agents while discussing potential benefits of installing a foreign interference coordinator (Somos 2021).

⁷⁷ Under Britain's ATAS, postgraduate applicants from abroad require security vetting to study subjects where their knowledge could be used in weapons programmes, according to a government website.

4.2. South Asia: India Stays ‘Ahead of the Curve’

India is an exception given the preponderance of anti-China lobbies and propaganda. The Ministry of External Affairs, in 2017, announced its decision to axe its annual grant to the ICS – the leading study Centre and think-tank on Chinese Studies in India set up in 1969 – because the Institute ‘maintained an independent platform to discuss China-related issues like the BRI’ which the government had strongly disapproved of (Haider, Bhattacharjee 2017). In fact, passionate nationalists support the government’s hard position on China, with many criticizing the pro-China tendency of intellectuals: ‘India’s present generation of China-sympathetic intellectuals, media professionals, and think tanks are primarily the products of China’s complex and refined influence operations, following from its fundamental strategic doctrine of winning wars without firing a single bullet’ (Pandya 2020).

The Doklam and the Galwan incidents have only exacerbated anti-China sentiments in India further, with the government proactively taking measures to stop any Chinese attempt to manipulate India’s higher education. While Indian colleges and universities have been discouraged from academic cooperation with Chinese counterparts without prior permission from the Ministry of Home Affairs and the Ministry of External Affairs, the restriction has also been applied to existing cooperation agreements which cannot become operational until both Ministries approve them (Nanda 2019). The restrictive regulations also cover educational exchange programs, agreements and joint announcements of intent and Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with Chinese institutions, by both private and publicly funded universities in India (Niazi 2019). The government has also come down heavily on the Chinese Association for International Understanding (CAIFU) – the well-resourced Beijing-based group tied to the UFWF and engaged with influence operations overseas – which will, from now on, be closely monitored. In an internal memo, the Indian government has listed the body as an entity of concern, signalling that its activities could run counter to national interests (*The Economic Times* 2020). India has also slapped new curbs on visas for Chinese businessmen, academics, industry experts, and advocacy groups, which will now require prior security clearance (Sen 2020).

The National Education Policy, under the Ministry of Education, also decided to drop Mandarin⁷⁸ from the list of suggested languages, while placing several higher education institutes offering Chinese language training under scrutiny (Haider, Jebaraj 2020), as alluded to earlier. It is interesting to note that the Ministry had sent letters to at least five institutions that offer Chinese language training programs – without any collaboration with the *Hanban* – asking them to send all details of collaboration since 2017 (Ibid). Another interesting aspect of India’s counter-influence strategy is its increasingly deeper engagement with non-state actors from Taiwan. Indian universities are beginning to engage more Mandarin language teachers from Taiwan for teaching in leading Indian universities.⁷⁹ Indian think-tanks are also collaborating with their Taiwanese counterparts. As part of a broader global strategic alliance looking to counter an aggressive China, India’s deeper engagement

⁷⁸ According to a faculty who is a part of the Chinese Studies programme in a leading Indian university in New Delhi, the Wuhan Summit in 2018 had intensified more educational and cultural exchanges between the two countries with Chinese teachers visiting Indian schools to teach Mandarin. However, the subsequent Doklam and the Galwan stand-offs not only put an end to these academic interactions but imbued India with more suspicions of the CCP-backed actions with new visa restrictions imposed on travel.

⁷⁹ Author’s interview with scholars.

with Taiwan in its academic domain might become a lasting feature of its China containment strategy.⁸⁰

While Beijing's outreach in Indian academia can hardly be termed 'aggressive' in comparison to its interference in other countries as discussed earlier, India has been careful to monitor Beijing's growing presence in higher education. At the same time, India has also been keen on honing its expertise on China to be able to deal with it more effectively. The Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) in 2017, just as Doklam embers were dying down, issued a circular calling for consultants fluent in Chinese from the private sector (Mitra 2017). The recruitment was part of a drive to set up the Indian foreign office's first in-house resource centre on China – which currently goes under the moniker of Centre for Contemporary Chinese Studies (CCCS) – for studying and formulating a country-specific policy (Ibid). With the aim to pre-empt any Chinese aggression in Indian higher education systems, the first instructions have already been sent out to Indian missions, asking them to send reports on the extent of Chinese influence in various countries to the new Centre (Ibid).

India, because of its complex ties and heightened tensions with China, has been overtly keen on pre-empting and tackling influence and is as active in this regard as some other Middle Powers like Australia and the UK. The rest of South Asia, as demonstrated by the examples of Bangladesh and Nepal, is hardly engaged in influence management; primarily due to their conviction in China's benign intentions and also because of hedging choices in the regional India-China competitive dynamics. It is clear that in South Asia, the approach to counter Chinese influence campaigns is distinct, depending on the specific country.

⁸⁰ Author's interview with scholars in New Delhi.

5. NEXT STEPS

China's aggressive influence activities demand comprehensive strategies to counter Beijing's manipulation of foreign academic communities in various countries.

In India, the character of the Chinese influence campaign has been relatively muted and low-key compared to Western countries, largely due to strained ties between the two that have led to greater suspicion and closer scrutiny of Chinese activities in India. Even then, whether Indian academia will count among the future targets of China's aggressive influence operations remains a major concern for Indian policymakers. The worry is reflected in the Indian NSA's recent thoughts: 'subverting India's civil society is the new warfare', given that the civil society is inherently fragile, prone to divisive fractures and manipulation of opinions (*The Times of India* 2021).

India faces a complicated task in mitigating China's influence. Halting collaborations with Chinese state academic agencies and actors can create diplomatic complications. India cannot afford to overlook the fact that it needs to work with China in various multilateral and regional forums, such as COP-26,⁸¹ BRICS⁸² and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation to pursue major global and regional developments and stability goals. It is also required to work with China in major development finance institutions such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and the New Development Bank. Indeed, working with China is essential for maintenance of peace and stability in Asia and smooth functioning of various institutions – a vision that India, as a responsible Middle Power, cannot afford to ignore. Yet, at the same time, it must step up its vigil for containing Chinese influence efforts, which are likely to intensify in Indian academia. The strategy for India therefore needs to combine the external requirements of working with China with the domestic requirements of safeguarding constituencies and spheres targeted for influence action.

Policy recommendations for Indian universities:

- Clear guidelines for Indian universities and think-tanks should be instituted defining the domain and scope for collaborating with their Chinese counterparts. Clarity needs to be particularly strong in instances where Chinese funding is involved. While Chinese funding in very specific academic areas like language teaching and research need not be totally discouraged, universities should have internal mechanisms for monitoring the utilisation of funds coming from Chinese sources.
- Indian universities should try to pick up lessons from their counterparts in other countries such as Germany (Fulda, Missal 2021). For example, Indian universities should caution individual researchers to be alert in their Chinese engagements and proactive in alerting their universities about potential reputational risks and other costs of cooperating with China. They could also reach out to academics in other institutions to collectively craft cross-institutional policies to deal with Chinese influence operations.
- Indian universities should collaborate with other foreign universities/think-tanks to organise conferences/seminars to jointly discuss China's overt influence operations in their respective universities/think-tanks and possibly develop plans to pre-empt and counter Chinese academic interference.

⁸¹ The United Nation's annual conference on climate change.

⁸² BRICS is the acronym for five major emerging economies: Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa. having significant influence on regional affairs.

Policy recommendations for the Indian government:

- With respect to academics, it is important to brief them on the influence operations by China, as academics are likely to be unfamiliar with such actions. Specifically, academics and scholars travelling to China on Chinese-government funded programmes should be briefed before travel to China on ‘what to expect’. This will help the academics in evaluating the Chinese narratives objectively.
- India’s tradition of encouraging freedom of expression and debates among contrasting viewpoints and opinions should be utilized to counter China’s unilateral and state-centric narratives. Without resorting to active propaganda against Beijing, New Delhi need not be overly sensitive about domestic opinions that might look at China in a less critical light. In fact, this will help in building a wholesome body of opinions on China in India and help the government in considering various points of views while deciding Indian academia’s spheres of engagement with China.
- India should also maintain extensive diplomatic engagement with its South Asian neighbours, like Bangladesh and Nepal, countries with which India has historically been close, and which are being heavily engaged by China for cultivating strategic influence. Instances like the blockade of transport and goods between India and Nepal in 2015 should be avoided to ensure that close neighbours continue to enjoy trust and faith in India and its neighbourhood policies. Otherwise, these countries will become even easier targets for Chinese influence operations and anti-Indian narratives.
- Government efforts to know more about China should extend to its engaging external and foreign experts for the purpose. With China having ‘closed’ itself to most sources of information, such as through US browsers (e.g., Google) and social media platforms (e.g., Facebook, Twitter), knowledge from China can only be obtained from those travelling to China and following its developments closely. Many such experts from India’s partners – Australia, Canada, the UK and the US – can provide insights on Chinese strategic matters that are not possible to be known in India. Working closely with friends and partners who share the common concern of dealing with an aggressive China can be useful in pre-empting Chinese influence designs.
- India should continue to spearhead multilateralism on subjects of global public salience to project its international image as a responsible power. It has already shown considerable proactivity in this regard through its initiatives on global supply of vaccines and for reducing carbon emissions at the COP-26. Such efforts, while garnering goodwill for India, will help it in engaging more actively with other countries in building greater awareness and knowledge about China’s influence operations.
- Taiwan has become a key strategic point for counterbalancing China. India should deepen its efforts to academically engage with institutes and experts in Taiwan. Taiwan’s geographical proximity to China and its social, cultural and business links with the mainland could be vital in expanding India’s further knowledge of modern China and help in mitigating influence actions.

The above suggestions do not apply only to India. Countries wary of China’s efforts to entrench influence within their domestic academic institutions should be able to connect to many of the above suggestions for specific applications to their own country contexts. However, much depends on their readiness and willingness to do so. China’s economic and geo-political weight is enormous

in today's world. As a result, most countries, notwithstanding their wariness of China and its efforts to control their domestic stakeholders and opinion-makers, are unable to resort to counterbalancing tactics for fear of Chinese retaliation. At the same time, countries need to work with China on various global and bilateral matters, as it is impossible to ignore China in any respect. Tackling Chinese influence therefore remains an exceptionally challenging task.

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APPENDIX A. QUESTIONNAIRE FOR INDIAN ACADEMIA

1. There has been a rise in interest to learn Chinese language and other courses related to China. Why do you think there has been a rise despite the border dispute between the two countries?
2. Do you think strategic issues, in any ways, influence students' current perception on China? Do strategic issues, in any ways, play a role in their taking up courses on China?
3. Given the long history of teaching Chinese in leading universities like yours, why did your University never opt for a Confucius Institute? Was it a university policy? Cultural issues? An Indian government discouragement?
4. Was there ever an offer from the Chinese side to establish a Confucius Institute?
5. What are the courses you offer on China at the university?
6. Is there any collaboration with Chinese universities?
7. Have there been Chinese students/faculty from the mainland at your university? How many?
8. In the case of Chinese faculty, which Chinese University do they come from? Is it a regular affair? What do they teach at the University?
9. Now that universities have switched to online classes, do you have any Chinese faculty from the mainland? Is there any precedence?
10. How many Indian students have gone to China to study from your university? Any scholarships given by the university or the Chinese government?
11. Have there been influence campaigns of any kind by the Chinese faculty or the Chinese government over the academics/students at the university? Maybe in the form of donations/scholarships/teacher exchange programs or even social media? Given your long experience teaching Chinese, do you think Chinese faculty have tried to offer a different perspective on issues related to India? Maybe on Tibet, Taiwan, or the border dispute?
12. Since you have been dealing with China for a long time, how do you think their strategy has changed with regard to higher education in India?
13. Describe the kind of writings by Indian academia on China that have started to appear in journals, newspapers, books.

APPENDIX B. QUESTIONNAIRE FOR NEPALESE ACADEMIA

1. How does the Nepalese academia perceive China?
2. How many functional CIs are there in Nepal?
3. Describe the kind of interest Nepalese have in learning Chinese.
4. Has interest been rising over the last few years and why?
5. Does Beijing try to influence Nepal's academia in any ways? Maybe by granting funds, instituting think tanks, offering scholarships, paid trips for the faculty to visit China and so on?
6. Could you name a few institutes that are funded by China, if any, and the kind of work they do?
7. What is the character of these influence activities? How successful are these? Have these activities been able to change narratives on China which are more favorable to Beijing?
8. During the COVID-19 pandemic, are student scholarships to Nepalese students continuing? Are they able to go to China for their studies? Any visa restrictions on them?
9. Are there Chinese faculty/students in Nepal? What do the Chinese faculty teach? How many are there? Do they try to influence their Nepalese colleagues in a discreet manner?
10. What kind of positive propaganda does China engage in Nepal? How much of it is done through CIs? Any other forums through which they try and influence Nepalese academia and students?

APPENDIX C. QUESTIONNAIRE FOR BANGLADESHI ACADEMIA

1. How is the BRI being covered by the Bangladeshi academia?
2. Has China been pushing the BRI in Bangladesh? How?
3. What is China's image within the Bangladeshi academia?
4. Describe the kind of writings on China that are published in journals and newspapers by professors and other research staff.
5. Is the interest in learning about China rising (prior to the pandemic)? If yes/no, why do you think so?
6. Are there many independent Chinese study centers/think tanks in Bangladesh teaching/researching about China's economics and foreign policy, apart from language and culture? Who funds them? And are the Bangladeshi faculty members equipped to teach these subjects in Bangladesh or do they get short-term Chinese teachers from the mainland?
7. Are there definite topics that these think tanks are encouraged to undertake in research?
8. Are there any partly funded/fully funded research institutes/universities by China in Bangladesh? Could you name a few?
9. How many Chinese students come to study in Bangladesh universities? What courses do they enroll for?
10. How many Chinese faculty teach in Bangladesh? Which universities do they teach in?
11. Which universities do these Chinese faculty come from in China? Do they teach the language or other papers on China, like maybe culture?
12. What kind of regular faculty exchange (short-term visiting) programs are held each year with China? What is the mandate for these kind of field visits? Have they been on BRI?

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